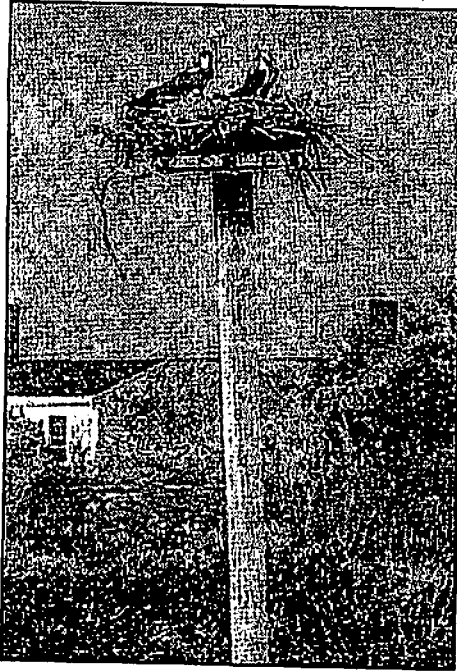


Together for Osprey

By KEITH L. MARTIN

Conservationists, bird enthusiasts and casual onlookers gathered early Wednesday morning for a yearly ritual in Duxbury that both educates and fascinates: the banding of the osprey.



A male and female osprey watch over two chicks from their nest off Hicks Point Road.

For the last 12 years, the town has worked with the Massachusetts Audubon Society to place aluminum identification bands on osprey chicks spotted by citizen watchers who monitor the various nests in town.

The banding is done in conjunction with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Bird Banding Laboratory, which collects data from the bands when osprey are spotted or captured. By calling the phone number on the band, the federal organization and the local groups they work with get vital information on the migration habits and dispersal of the osprey.

According to Norm Smith of the Massachusetts Audubon Society, some banding, such as that done on Martha's Vineyard, involves radio transmitters placed on the chicks to track individual birds and their movement. Banding research has provided valuable

research in studying the birds, including the fact that some species go south in one pathway and return north by another. Smith also said that while the osprey mate for life with their partners, when they head south for the winter, they do not stay together in the same nest. They do, however, return to their home nest within one day of one another.

On Wednesday, several citizens gathered at one of the most visible osprey nests off Hicks Point Road, in the backyard of Nancy Bennett.

Bennett and her husband have had the pole behind their house since 1987 and have followed every osprey family who've come along over the years through a spotting scope in their backyard. Bennett even tracks the age of the chicks, noting that the most recent pair living on the pole turned 40 days old on Wednesday.

But once a year, she and other curious citizens get a chance to actually see the chicks up close during the banding process.

Smith, along with town Conservation Agent Joe Grady and



Smith banded this osprey chick nesting on a pole off Scat Island which Naushon Hale helped rebuild as part of his Eagle Scout project last summer.



Norm Smith of the Massachusetts Audubon Society puts a band on a 40-day-old osprey chick.

staff from his office, take a ladder out to the poles to climb up and band the chicks who are not yet old enough to fly, yet have legs big enough to support the bands.

At the first stop at Hicks Point Road, the chicks' mother anxiously circled above the nest, screeching for her babies

remarked how "fat" and healthy the bird was, noting that a recent breakfast of bass was found in the nest as well.

Grady said that the banding process is an important task to gauge the overall health of Duxbury Bay and to see how the ecosystem of the area is doing, as the birds feed of fish in the area.

"I'm definitely happy to see that they are still standing after the rough winter we had. It was great to see the poles... but to see two chicks was even better."

—DHS student, Naushon Hale

to stay down as Smith approached. Smith banded one chick up at the nest and brought another down for spectators to watch the banding process, which takes a few seconds. As the baby osprey pecked at his hands, Smith quickly slipped the band on the bird's legs and

Of the nearly 110 osprey chicks banded in Duxbury, said Grady, only three have been found: one at Logan Airport, one at Hanscom Air Force Base and a wounded bird located on Cape Cod.

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Osprey Chicks Banded

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Along with banding the birds, Grady also used a global positioning system to identify the exact latitude and longitude of the nests to match with each band.

After Hicks Point Road, Smith and Grady's staff headed to the marshes in the Back River to check on two poles with a special connection to a Duxbury citizen. Only accessible by boat, the group took to the waters north of the Powder Point Bridge to reach a pair of nesting poles.

Last summer, former Duxbury High School student Naushon Hale reconstructed two osprey nest poles at Scat Island and the "Town Line" pole that sits between Duxbury and Marshfield, which had collapsed due to its poor condition. Hale did the work as an Eagle Scout project, watched the banding

process last year and returned last week to see how his work was holding up.

At the Scat Island pole, two more osprey chicks were located and banded, but the Town Line pole had no offspring to show. Two osprey parents watched from the site of the former pole as the group checked for chicks and inspected the pole's condition.

"I'm definitely happy to see that they are still standing after the rough winter we had," said the 18-year-old Hale. "It was great to see the poles...but to see two chicks was even better."

Despite the 50 percent success rate on osprey chicks, Grady had encouraging words for Hale on the boat ride back to shore.

"Think of it this way: you've created a place for two osprey chicks and a future home for another family," he said.

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A VIEW FROM ABOVE: An osprey chick relaxes while enjoying the view of the Back River.